

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

October 20th, 1943

DEAR MEMBER,

The submission to Parliament of the new Education Bill, which will take place before long, will confront the nation with a momentous choice. Like all great choices it brings us into the sphere of ultimate decision; that is to say, it has religious significance. But its principal religious significance may not lie where many Christians think, that is, in the provisions made for specifically religious teaching. That is in itself a question of the highest moment. But Christians have no less a concern that the nation should as a nation fulfil the will of God, which is a will for justice. "Let judgment roll down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream."

The crucial matter is the purpose of the Bill. That purpose, as stated in the White Paper already issued, is to provide a greatly enlarged opportunity for boys and girls. It proposes to remove a gross and scandalous injustice from which up till now the majority of the youth of the nation have suffered through the denial to them of the chance of making the best use of their lives for the good of the community. That is the big, fundamental choice that the nation has to make, and its whole future may depend on the way in which it is made.

The question to be decided is how much faith the nation has in its own future, whether it believes that that future depends in the last resort on the quality of its men and women, and consequently whether it is determined to make the physical, intellectual and moral growth of its citizens its primary concern.

A SENSE OF PROPORTION

The vital matter is the critical national decision that has to be made. The issue in regard to education is part of a larger question in which our national existence is at stake, just as much as in the war itself. It is the question whether the national energies will be so exhausted by the war that there will be no strength or initiative to reap the fruits of victory, or whether the nation will have the faith, courage and hope to begin to build a new world on the ruins of the old. But the answer to this larger question cannot be given in general terms, but only in resolute decisions on particular questions. And among these, what we do about our boys and girls is perhaps the most crucial.

There is, of course, all the difference in the world between obstruction of the Bill for unworthy reasons and genuine difficulties about particular provisions which are felt to be inimical to the true interests of education. But if those who are concerned as Christians about the great ends of justice allow their attention to become concentrated on disagreements about secondary matters, the effect on the fate of the

Bill may be exactly the same as its destruction by the forces of inertia, apathy and selfish interest. For this reason those who care passionately for the future of our boys and girls must firmly resolve not to lose their sense of proportion and be strictly on their guard against allowing themselves to be deflected from their main purpose.

What part are the Churches going to play in the large spiritual choices which the nation has to make? Will they fail to see the wood because of their pre-occupation with particular trees? Will the historian of the future have to record that the interest of Christians in the future of education was dissipated over so wide a field that they were unable to recognize a crucial turning-point in the national life, and consequently to exert any appreciable influence on the course of events?

The signs are not wholly encouraging. It is shocking to come across phrases that the Bill will be wrecked unless fair play is given to this or that religious interest. What is still more disquieting is the extent to which in many religious quarters attention is concentrated so fiercely on particular features as to obliterate all understanding of the major issues at stake. A friend who attended in quick succession the debates of two bodies whose interests would be affected by the White Paper, the first a secular body and the second a religious, writes: "Neither body was entirely pleased with the Government's proposals, and both were anxious to safeguard certain interests of their own. But the first discussion took place against a background of passionate desire for educational advance and real terror that too much criticism might cramp the Government's style and wreck the Bill. I wish I could say the same about the second."

A strong lead entirely in the right direction has already been given by the Archbishops of the Church of England and leaders of the Free Churches in a jointly signed letter sent to members of Parliament in April and afterwards published in the press. The letter reads as follows:—

"In common with all who care for the welfare of the country, we are looking forward eagerly to the new Education Bill. We believe that one of the primary requirements of social justice is an effective move in the direction of full educational opportunity for all. It may be that in the discussion of the Bill in Parliament and elsewhere we ourselves and other spokesmen of the Churches will be obliged to give special attention to the clauses dealing with specifically religious instruction. For that very reason we want now to say that we eagerly desire to see carried into law a truly effective educational reform, creating something like equality of educational opportunities for all. We trust that if differences arise between the religious bodies they will be confined to a small area of the Bill and will not be such as to impede the educational advance so urgently needed for the general welfare."

The case could not be better stated. What is needed now is that those who realize how much is at stake should rally behind this lead, and that the Churches individually and collectively should concentrate their energies on seeing that the issue is presented to their membership in its true proportions.

As the proof of this News-Letter is being corrected a pamphlet entitled *Educational Reform and Social Justice: What should Christians Stand For?* has been published under the auspices of the Christian Education Movement.¹ It takes as its starting point the declaration by the leaders of the Churches which has just been quoted, and asserts that many of the matters involved in the new educational proposals are "plain moral issues of justice, freedom and equal opportunity." From this standpoint it proceeds to a balanced discussion of some of the major questions about which Christians must make up their minds. It may be warmly commended to those who want to play their part in helping the nation to make a right decision.

BELIEF IN THE RESURRECTION

The headmaster of a well-known public school has sent me some interesting evidence of the way in which the younger generation, so far as they have come under his observation, tend to look at these questions. He had a copy of the letter from Mr. Curtis typed, and asked the boys in the sixth form and one other form to comment on it in writing. He writes as follows:—

"The problem Curtis sets is a familiar one, of course. It really takes two forms. First, there is the difficulty felt by men who accept the validity of the natural laws, on the acceptance of which our present culture is based, in believing that the reversal of these laws implied by the stories of the miracles and the resurrection can be true. Second, there is the difficulty in seeing the relevance of the miracles and the resurrection in determining such questions as the divinity of Christ, the truth of the Gospel and so on. Curtis really makes it clear that he is faced by both difficulties. Probably the first is the form in which the problem strikes most men and women to-day.

"Now, my own experience is that intelligent boys to-day find the first difficulty far less serious than those of my own generation did. This does not mean that they reject the conception of natural laws or that they accept astrology or some such nonsense. What I say applies just as much to 'science specialists' as to others. But they do not feel in the way that we used to do that a belief in the miracles or the resurrection, as part of the phenomena of a unique event in history, must make necessary any weakening in their belief in natural laws. They just do not find in this a particularly serious intellectual difficulty. Of the more intelligent boys who commented on Curtis' letter, nearly all expressed a belief in the resurrection and some of them gave well argued reasons for doing so. I believe there is a really serious shift of opinion on this question and that it may well be very significant.

"On the other hand, this difficulty clearly means a good deal more to the less intelligent boys. This was particularly obvious in the case of the other form I referred to. They showed a natural sense of criticism and scepticism, towards the miracles for instance, which they would never show in a laboratory. Those answers which I had from VI form which were critical of the miracles and the resurrection were mostly (but not entirely) from the least critically-minded boys. I

¹ Obtainable from the Press and Publications Board, Church Assembly, 2 Great Peter Street, Westminster, S.W. 1. Price 4d., post free 5d.

believe that the so-called 'scientific' critical reaction to Christian dogma has now become set as the normal, conventional attitude. I am quite sure that it can no longer be taken as the sign of a 'critical mind.'

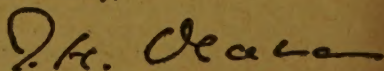
"The other question is that of the relevance of the miracles and the resurrection. Here I do not think that the more intelligent boys found themselves so far removed from Curtis' point of view. Only a very few said that they felt that a belief in the resurrection was necessary for a belief in the divinity of Christ, though several said that the resurrection was necessary to get that belief 'started,' as it were.

"On the whole the 'difficulties' of the more intelligent boys do not seem to me to be the same as those expressed in Curtis' letter. They lie in another direction.

"The most obvious difficulty, apparent in a few of the best answers I read (and in discussion and conversation), arose from an acceptance of the theory that moral values are essentially subjective, arising out of the social conditions of the time. The intelligent boy to-day is likely to read enough communist literature to become familiar with the idea of economic materialism and he is very likely to be attracted by it, because it is one of the bases of a faith that seems to him alive. To accept the divinity of Christ entails accepting the belief that Christ's life was a unique occurrence in history. I do not think that the intelligent boy to-day finds that science makes it impossible for him to accept that belief. He may well find that his view of history makes it impossible. If he does, then I do not think he will find the miracles and the resurrection to be events that compel him to abandon his historical dogma. They can be shed without difficulty. I believe that they may be the key to the problem for the near future. Christians are going to find Karl Marx a more serious opponent than T. H. Huxley, and I believe that a merely obscurantist attitude towards the former will do the Church as much harm as it did before when applied to the latter."

The writer of this week's Supplement has been a teacher and a training college lecturer. The evacuation of school children took her for the first time to live in the country, not as a mere observer, but as a temporary and active participant in the life of a village community.

Yours sincerely,



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RELIGION IN THE COUNTRY

If a war-time "evacuee" with some fairly widespread experience of religious life in towns and cities ventures to speak on a subject like this, it must be, of course, under correction from life-long country folk. Yet perhaps it is easier for the comparative newcomer to see some of the distinctive characteristics of religion in the country to-day. I must make it clear, though, that I am speaking of one village only, and of a south country village; I know that some of my comments could not apply to many villages in the north and west of England. It may be that others, nevertheless, will recognize likenesses to their own problems, and will be able to suggest ways out of certain difficulties other than those which have occurred to me.

THE RELIGIOUS SITUATION TO-DAY

Probably a larger proportion of people in our village have loose links with some place of worship than in most towns and suburbs. They come to church to marry, to have their babies christened and their dead buried. They generally send their children to Sunday school until they are ten or eleven. Only a few encourage those same children to proceed to confirmation or church membership. But everybody turns out for Easter Day, for the harvest festival, for Home Guard parades and national days of prayer. With this formal acknowledgement of official religion linger some relics of a more primitive supernaturalism. "I'm not a religious man," says my neighbour, deploring an unseasonable summer, "but I sometimes think this weather has been sent to punish us for the war." Pain and disaster bring out a streak of fatalism. "Ah well! it seems it was to be." Sometimes it creeps close to the borders of a more Christian country: "Yes, Hitler *looks* as if he's winning all along the line; but it can't last. There's a Power stronger than him." Even if this is a relic only of an older faith, it means something, and something, I think, that you do not often meet in the suburbs.

This is the positive side of the natural conservatism of the country; there is a more negative side. Some of it is common to town and country: the indifference, the attitude that regards religion as a hobby like any other. There is not much active antagonism to religion. But there is extreme and (to a town-bred Christian) staggering ignorance of modern national and international Christian movements, of pronouncements by the leaders of the churches, and of recent religious literature. This applies even to the parsons.

It is not too much to say that religious life in the country as I have seen it here is at least twenty years behind the towns in social thinking and intellectual interests. God forbid that I should say it is behind the towns spiritually. There is great faithfulness and great zeal; but also there is, without a doubt, a great lack of the wisdom that comes of wide mental experience. And even among the faithful and the zealous there is a tendency to question the value of wisdom, a tendency to quote

Paul on the foolishness of wisdom as if he had meant to absolve the Christian from using his brains at all ; a tendency which has often driven me to reflect upon the words of Jesus recommending the wisdom of the serpent to His followers.

INTELLECTUAL ISOLATION

Of course there are reasons for this "time-lag." Any concentration of gifts and graces among the larger populations, any physical remoteness from the centre, is bound to mean a slow infiltration of ideas to the circumference. "It takes five years," said a friend of mine, "for an idea from headquarters to reach the country at all ; much longer for it to be in any way accepted." Twenty years ago, as a girl in a north country city, I remember a new word creeping into our church life. The study of psychology and its relation to religion was becoming familiar among others than doctors and schoolmasters. Twenty years later, in this village, I doubt if three people, beyond the doctor and the schoolmaster, could give you the name of any writer on psychology and religion. But an intelligent woman of thirty-seven or so, coming to borrow a book on the subject, confesses that she feels rather frightened of the very name ; she has only heard rather sneering references to "This new psychology" in sermons. Again, twenty years ago in the north I remember tremendous discussions among sixteen-year-olds on verbal inspiration and progressive revelation in the Bible. We had our fundamentalists and our modernists, but we also had leaders able and willing to give us material for forming our own judgments. Twenty years later, in this village, it is still possible for a substitute Sunday school teacher to be eagerly interrogated by intelligent girls, meeting for the first time in their lives a church worker who does not believe in the equal and literal inspirational value of every word in the Bible. These girls, some of them scholarship holders at the nearest secondary school, are being awakened by their education, of course ; and they number perhaps 2 per cent of their age group in the village. The rest seem not to question what has been so positively affirmed to them as the Church's teaching all their lives. But the lack of solid intellectual reality in their beliefs gradually chills their natural emotional response to religion in adolescence ; how many of those who are confirmed or who come to the chapel penitent-form at fourteen are active and eager church members ten years later ?

CHURCH LEADERSHIP

There are other difficulties. The lack of leadership has been suggested already. Of the three parsons in our village, the vicar is elderly, shy, stiff, concerned with Church routine and hardly ever seen in the homes of the people ; the Free Church pastor is young and energetic, much liked personally, but with his evangelical fervour hampered by an almost complete lack of education and a painfully confused fundamentalist theology ; the R.C. priest, a good fellow in himself and probably the best educated of the three, is limited by the time-honoured suspicion of Popery and the narrowness of his own Church's views on co-operation. I doubt whether any of them knows there is such a thing as the Christian News-Letter or even understands the point of view it

represents. In other professions, differences of pay and opportunity have sent the best natural leaders to the towns. The war has, of course, accentuated the problem. Of the leaders who remain, the few really keen ones are driven by lack of fellowship into an extremism which makes ordinary people regard a balanced modern orthodoxy of the type familiar to readers of the C.N.L. as non-existent or practically impossible.

In our village the new war-time youth organizations are led by well-meaning and zealous experts, with a certain amount of social prestige, who regard themselves as doing important war-time work among the young, and who really do give them, besides a uniform, some first-class training of various sorts. But partly by pressure on scanty leisure, partly by force of contrast, they kill the older established Girls' Life Brigades and young people's Bible classes. These war-time activities, here at least, are unlikely to continue longer than "the duration"; their leaders consider themselves as "doing their bit" and they lack a permanent motive. But, as the organizations themselves are practically without a religious background, the habit of linking week-night activities with church life will have been broken for most of these young folk.

SOCIAL DISTINCTIONS IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

I have referred to social prestige. With some hesitation, and again speaking only for the village I know, I have to add yet another problem to the list; the problem of social distinctions and the lack of co-operation in Christian work for which they are responsible. My own introduction to this was amusing. Soon after we came here a lady called on me with a copy of the parish magazine, and in accepting it I mentioned that we were nonconformists. "Oh, that doesn't matter," she said, kindly but with quite unmistakable classification of us in her voice, "people of all classes take it!" In this village the parish church claims all the "upper class" Christians and most of the better off "middle class." The one free church cause has, on the whole, a "lower middle class" and poor congregation. There is a small Unitarian chapel with a well-to-do, elderly middle-class congregation, and a Roman Catholic church which probably contains the largest range of social groups of any. There are, of course, large numbers of working class people who are nominally "C. of E." and actually nothing. Spasmodic efforts at co-operation are made; a small discussion group and a moral welfare committee, both recently formed, contain representatives of all churches; and there are "combined" services on occasions such as Armistice Day. But these touch only the fringe of the problem. The masses of the congregations barely meet socially; and so they do not co-operate as Christians, although they do so over Civil Defence and jam-making in the Women's Institute! The unhappy consequence is that on one side there is a sense of undeserved inferiority, pugnacity over trifles, and some ill-informed criticism of the Church of England's "insincerity" and "formality"; on the other, extreme ignorance of the values and traditions of Nonconformity, some ill-informed suspicion of heresy, and at the best a shade of condescension. This situation seems, to people who recall the happiest fellowship between church and chapel

in other places, a real tragedy and perhaps the worst feature of religious life in the neighbourhood.

SOME SUGGESTIONS

How to suggest ways out of the wood ?

It seems to me that the problem of ignorance might be tackled in two ways—through books and through the leaders. For instance, I should like to see a small circulating library of modern religious books and periodicals in connection with every church, and open after every church service. People in the country are shy of the market-town's bookshops, and don't easily remember the titles of books unless these are put under their noses directly after the recommendation has been made. And recommendations ought to be the job of the leaders, particularly the parsons. The leaders we have already need help themselves ; but there is more help actually available than they are using. The war has brought potential leaders into the country as well as taking some away, if only country folk would make an effort to overcome their innate suspicion of the stranger. Then country folk themselves could take on more responsibility for their Church life. Country women are splendid organizers and often delightful speakers on secular subjects—most churches would be in a poor way without their womenfolk ; it is time more use was made of them without regarding that use as a regrettable "second best."

But the point where I see most hope, in spite of all I have said, is among the young folk. It takes more than a war to stop young people from wanting to talk about religion, even if it is shyly and secretly, among themselves, and with the most abysmal ignorance of the vocabulary. If we only knew, they *are* talking about it ; but they will not say what they feel to leaders who approach them to tell them what they ought to believe. I would like to see us going to them, frankly, as learners like themselves, asking their help in the re-planning of our Sunday worship and activities ; opening our homes and our hearts to them for fellowship and discussion on equal terms, prepared to listen and to be sympathetic even if some of the things they say shock us at the centre of our being ; sympathy need not mean sacrifice of principle. And at every point we must be ready to bear witness to the things that we have seen and felt : the deepest things in our lives. If we look back, it was usually some older person's conscious or unconscious witness which first made God real to us. I would like to see a real attempt made to meet the intellectual and the spiritual needs of our young people in the country churches, an attempt which would not insist on forcing them into the old channels of Church life and service, but would allow them to develop and extend their own discoveries about God. I cannot believe that it is impossible ; but I am afraid country churches as I have seen them will find such an attempt very difficult.

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